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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000099

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IO/HR FOR AMY OSTERMEIER, DRL/IRF FOR JOANNELLA MORALES

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [UN](#) [KVIR](#) [PINR](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: BANGLADESH: OPEN TO DIALOGUE BUT NON-COMMITTAL, ON  
DEFAMATION OF RELIGIONS

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

#### Summary

1. (C) During a visit by DRL Senior Advisor Ambassador Michael Kozak, the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) expressed its openness to alternatives to a United Nations resolution banning defamation of religions. Interlocutors stressed Bangladesh's commitment to religious tolerance and fundamental human rights. The Foreign Secretary, Secretary for the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Law Minister welcomed the USG's initiative on this issue but remained non-committal about their government's participation. Members of civil society spoke of the need for communal harmony and of their desire for separation of church and state.

#### Values-based Bangladesh Foreign Policy?

2. (C) Foreign Secretary Mohamed Mijarul Quayes, welcomed Ambassador Kozak's visit and explained that Bangladesh had been born out of a commitment to democracy, electoral rights and cultural identity. Quayes said Bangladesh would pursue a foreign policy based upon values. Quayes added that during the Cold War, the international community witnessed the emergence of "global ghettos" and said that with today's challenges there was a pressing need to build bridges between countries. Ambassador Kozak acknowledged that UN resolutions on defamation of religions were the result of a real problem of discrimination against Muslims in Europe. He expressed the United States' desire, however, to move the issue away from endless debates on UN resolutions and towards concrete action at the domestic level, namely strengthening laws to prevent hate crimes while building in greater protections for free speech. Ambassador Kozak emphasized that more free speech and tolerance were the best antidotes to hate speech. He presented a copy of the U.S. Action Plan to the Foreign Secretary.

#### Bangladesh to Facilitate Broader Discussion

3. (C) The Foreign Secretary agreed on the need for dialogue and said that Bangladesh would be happy to engage in a broader discussion about the issue. He emphasized that Bangladesh was a land of multiple faiths with protections against religious discrimination. He encouraged the USG to take a middle ground between the Organization for Islamic Conference (OIC) countries and the European Union and to

facilitate such a dialogue. Quayes also stated that there needed to be fewer resolutions in the UN Human Rights Council. Ambassador Kozak suggested that Bangladesh could perform a bridging role within the OIC in this regard and pointed out that we wanted to offer a concrete alternative to the current OIC resolution.

#### Bangladesh as a Model for Religious Tolerance?

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14. (C) The Secretary of the Ministry for Religious Affairs, Abdur Rauf Howlader, welcomed the U.S. position and stated that the GOB was very pleased to hear of our "constructive approach" to the problem of religious intolerance. Howlader reiterated the country's commitment to communal harmony and the constitution's guarantee for freedom from discrimination based upon religion and sex. The Secretary also pointed out that the GOB had partnered with the USG on initiatives to promote tolerance, like the Leaders of Influence Program, and said that we could be assured of further collaboration. He promised that the Ministry would carefully review the U.S. Action Plan and provide comments.

#### Democracy as a Bulwark of Secularism

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15. (C) Law Minister, Barrister Shafique Ahmed, welcomed our points and stated that religious freedom was one of the fundamental principles of state policy enshrined in the constitution. He remarked that the GOB is "fully with you." The Law Minister emphasized that democracy could not flourish if religion entered politics, citing the examples of

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Afghanistan and Pakistan. Ambassador Kozak agreed that government's role was not to promote religion. Ahmed also added that the voters of Bangladesh had given the Awami League government a mandate based upon secularism. The Minister said his government did not want to ban expressions of religion but rather to crush violent extremism.

#### Civil Society on the Cutting Edge?

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16. (C) During a roundtable discussion with the Ambassador, scholars from all the major religions and members of faith-based organizations categorically stated that communal harmony should be the ultimate goal of any "good" society. They agreed that the government should not discriminate based upon religion and noted that Bangladesh was already putting into practice many of the ideas the U.S. was advocating. The leader of the Ahmadiya (minority Muslim sect) community in Bangladesh opined that religion and politics should exist as separate entities, pointing out that Islam had survived 1400 years without litigation. A Professor of Religion from Dhaka University stated that politicians in the country had abused religion for political purposes, for example when Islam was made a state religion. Agreeing with the principles enshrined in the U.S. initiative, roundtable participants concurred that the best antidotes to communal problems were education and interfaith dialogue at the local level.

#### Comment

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17. (C) The GOB is open to the U.S. position on the defamation issue but remains non-committal. Particularly at the higher political levels, this issue plays well to a government which is trying to emphasize Bangladesh's secular identity. The stumbling block may well be at the bureaucratic level in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is wedded to traditional voting patterns and to a desire not to push controversial positions within the OIC or G-77. In many respects, civil society is far ahead of the GOB on this issue and can serve as another pressure point with the

government. Post will continue to engage with the GOB on this subject at all levels.  
MORIARTY